Circular Letter #56

Oct. 1, 1928.

System for Grading Composition Work.

GOVERNMENT OF PORTO RICO

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

SAN JUAN

Oct. 1, 1928

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Circular Letter No. 56
Subject: System for Grading Composition Work.
To the Supervisors of Schools, High School Pfincipals and Teachers of High School English.

The fact that the English course is comprised of two distinct courses, one in literature and one in composition both oral and written, necessitates

a) that the relative importance of the two component parts of the course be evaluated, and

b) that methods be devised to arouse the student to a consciousness of the fact that in an English class he is taking two courses in one and that he must do acceptable work in both in order to pass the course

In regard to the relation that composition and literature bear to each other in our course, it clears up the situation to think of the composition work as the mastery of the instrument to be used in the study of the literature. The study of the language as such gives the mastery of it simply as a tool, and that should be the objective in this work. The purpose of the composition work is to enable the student to make the language a usable instrument for him. Obviously, unless the student gets a satisfactory knowledge of the language, the literature will remain a closed book.

Experience has shown that the majority of the students in a class do not have equally developed abilities in the study of composition and in literature. It usually happens that a student finds the understanding of literature easier than the mastery of composition; particularly does this apply to the type of student who is alert and has good ideas and who is bright and quick to understand what he reads but never applies himself to the actual work of learning composition. The result is that often the teacher and student arrive at the end of the year, the student deserving to pass on his literature work and not deserving to pass on the composition work, and the teacher, although conscientious in his work, unable to determine what is the fair and just thing to do; to keep such a student back a year in his work seems a pity, and to pass him on unevenly prepared seems an equal pity, for the student will always remain handicapped in his future work.

The question arises, What can be done to focus the attention of the student on the two component parts of the English course and to stimulate him to keep his work equally advanced in both lines? An answer will be found in the following plan. In grading the oral and written work of a student whether this work be a theme or a test with answers written out, let the teacher give the student two grades instead of the customary one which represents a sort of composite estimate on the various phases of the paper. Of these two grades one represents the standing received in the mechanics of composition and the other grade the standing on the content of the paper.

a) Mechanics of composition include

Verbs	Capitalization
Spelling	Grammar
Punctuation	Legibility

b) Content include

Selection and organization of material
Style

The two expressions, mechanics and content, are used respectively to indicate the compositional work and the literary value of the paper. Certainly these two fields appear to overlap, and to some extent they do, but on the whole they represent the two distinct elements that comprise the English course.

The value of giving two marks on each paper lies in the following:

a) It diagnoses for the student his own difficulties; it shows him where his own difficulties lie.

b) It indicates to the student the field in which he must place special effort in order to improve his standing and to balance his work.

c) It serves as a constant reminder to the student, thereby indivualizing the work of the teacher and making correctional work of more value.

As a matter of simplicity of routine, the teacher will find it convenient in grading papers always to write the grade in mechanics first and then the grade in content, putting one above the other; for example, D It is well to put the grade
B
in mechanics first in order to give it precedence in the thinking of the student, for as a rule he tends to understimate that phase of the work.

All sorts of combination of marks are possible; the wide variety of combinations that will appear reveal the value of this system of grading in order to strengthen and balance work in two fields. It is possible to find papers marked thus:

D B F A
A D A C

and so on. The appearance of an F accompanied by a passing mark should be the signal for immediate and thorough work in that field so that the student will pass in both.

The system of using two letters may be applied with equal success to oral composition as to written composition, the grade in mechanics applying to the use made of the language and the grade in content to the selection and organization of ideas.

PAPERS TO BE MAILED TO THE DEPARTMENT

Each teacher of English will please send to the Department by the end of October, or as much earlier as possible four papers from each year's work he is teaching, each graded with two marks in accordance with the plan outlined herein. (For example, if the teacher is teaching only twelfth year work, he will send to the Department four papers; but if he is teaching ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth year work, he will send sixteen papers. Let the papers represent a distribution from the highest to the lowest marks in each year's work; no exact distribution is asked for because the variety of combinations of marks makes it difficult to do so. Please select papers that are as representative as possible of the range of work done by the students.

Very truly yours,

(Signed) - JUAN B. HUYKE
Commissioner of Education

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